

## Federalism, Regionalism and accommodation of Unity in Diversity in India

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**Abstract:** Federalism as a constitutional mechanism ensures peace, stability and mutual accommodation in multi-cultural and diversified countries by dividing powers and resources between and among different levels of government. The paper tries to study and re-examine the current relationship of federalism, regionalism, and governance in India. The basic question that I seek to raise in this paper is how far Indian federalism has succeeded in order to bring unity in diversity and how far it survives as a polity in the face of persistent regionalism and often verging demands of separation and secessionism. The question has assumed special significance as we have seen that Indian federalism has got changed during the last four and half decades with the coming of regionalism trend into the forefront. The paper engages with the issue of accommodation of diversity in the wake of federation building and the critical references are made to the relevant theoretical literature in order to point out new problematic and drawbacks in India federalism. Relevance of the present study lies in the fact that it highlights the emerging trends of regionalism in Indian federal polity and the changes that occurred in the Indian federal system from the last decades of the present century.

**Keywords:** Federalism, Multiculturalism, Regionalism, Diversity, Unity, Equality, Democracy, Equality.

### Introduction

Diversity and multiculturalism has brought significant changes in Indian federalism from last four or more decades and for that reason has been much burdened and praised. Diversity describes political entities that are in contact with each other, yet have identifiable and individual differences. It encompasses differences based on ethnic or racial classifications, religious or ideological connotations, identities based on gender and other physical attributes, cultural values and political behavior and recognition of this diversity is known as multi-culturalism.<sup>i</sup> The multicultural state aims at holding together the society by considering this diversity as an asset. How can states foster cultural diversity? How can we build up institutions that can accommodate group identities? The only known possibility to foster diversity is to grant the different communities not only rights and liberties but also provide them with autonomy and the necessary competences to develop themselves according to their proper values. If one can find legitimate answer to these essential questions, one can consequently also find an answer to the question - Who should govern over whom; which majorities and which minorities should under which conditions have the right to claim governmental powers or majority rights?

For this very reason only a balanced distribution of powers between the centre and the decentralized unites on one side and a mechanism of decision making in which different minorities are able to influence the decisions of the centre will finally bring legitimate solution to these vexed questions. After experienced all other forms of government

like, unitary form, centralised, even in decentralisation, such balanced regulations of autonomy and shared powers can finally only be realized by federal constitutions.<sup>ii</sup> Federalism is a broad category of political systems in which, by contrast to the single central source of authority in unitary systems, there are two (or more) levels of government which combine elements of shared-rule through common institutions and regional self-rule for the governments of the constituent units.<sup>iii</sup> It is a constitutional mechanism for dividing power between different levels of government, such that federated units can enjoy substantial, constitutionally guaranteed autonomy over certain policy areas while sharing power in accordance with agreed rules over other policy areas. At the same time it prevents the tyranny of the minority as the tyranny of the majority legislature by providing balanced shared rule institutions and constitutional protection with constitutional review.<sup>iv</sup>

Federalism can be understood as a constitutional model, which would not only tolerate diversity but also foster it as an additional value, for which the multicultural state stands. It refers to the advocacy of multi-tiered government combining elements of shared-rule and regional self-rule. It is based on the presumed value and validity of combining unity and diversity and of accommodating, preserving and promoting distinct identities within a larger political union. The essence of federalism as a normative principle is the perpetuation of both Union and non-centralization at the same time.<sup>v</sup> Viewed from this position, federalism is to be regarded not only as an instrument to further limit governmental power but to include different

communities within the branches of sharing governmental power and at the same time to enable them within the limits of the overall common interest, to govern themselves and design themselves what is in their common interest. States should not only be open for universal values by excluding other cultures. They have rather to integrate different cultures all of them to be considered as a value for all citizens and all communities and thus to let them share governmental power in a way that all inhabitants and all ethnicities can participate on the common endeavour to implement liberty, peace and justice. It is not in the sense of treating diversities as problems that need to be managed but as strengths that are assets, as opportunities through which a plural society is enriched. Thus, federalism is a guarantor of the multicultural state which not only preserves diversity but rather foster it. Consequently, it becomes the instrument to implement the principle of diversity in unity.<sup>vi</sup>

Indian experience is no less important than any other case so far as the federal experiment is concerned. I argue that Indian federalism and Indian multiculturalism are corollaries to each other, and therefore, a discourse on the Indian federalism would be futile if its multicultural ethos is overlooked. Nearly sixty five years of Constitutional experiment in India is inextricably interwoven with the dynamic interplay of the federal principles. However, at the same time, the working of India's federal system reveals certain flaws and weaknesses both at the structural and the functional levels. On retrospect one realizes that certain flaws were inherent in the pattern of federal system India had adopted, namely the Union form, with its pronounced tilt towards centralisation of authority. Certain other flaws and weaknesses became apparent, some in the very process of the unfolding of the federal system and its processes and some others when popular demands for greater rights for segments and autonomy of states in the form of regionalism and for redressal of their grievances acquired momentum.

#### ***Federalism in Indian context: A Historical and Socio-cultural Dimension***

India is a classic plural society and massive federal polity which is really its most distinctive characteristic and a hall-mark of its unique personality. It's plural-federal character is practically apparent in every major aspect of its collective life, be it social systems, economic formations, culture-patterns; or language-dialect groupings, religious communities, castes, sub-castes and sects or ethnic identities, regional alignments and sub-regional attachments; or diversities of history marked by moments of triumphs and tragedies and in the rich tapestry of folklore, folk dance, music, cuisine, crafts and artefacts of life.<sup>vii</sup> Its pluralism gets amply reflected in our social and cultural streams encompassing 16

languages and some 2000 dialects, a dozen ethnic and seven religious groups fragmented into a large number of sects, castes and sub-castes, inhabiting some sixty socio-cultural sub-regions spread over seven natural geographic regions form the world's oldest and largest pluralist society, something the world has never seen in its recorded history.<sup>viii</sup> India is not only the world's largest i.e. populous, but also probably the most complex i.e. diverse, federal democracy. While its democratic structure protects its political unity, its federal form guarantees the harmonious co-existence of non-political diversities. Indeed, none of the federal polities, old or new, bourgeois or socialist – Imperial Germany, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Nigeria, Malaysia, Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union – are known to encompass such a wide-range of discrete sub-national identities and that too with a distinct historical past, as is the case with India.<sup>ix</sup>

India not start as a country with the commitment to federalism as an organized principle and even did not have the term federalism incorporated in the Preamble of the Constitution.<sup>x</sup> At the time of independence, the founding fathers drawing lessons from Euro-American traditions of constitutionalism and from their own collective wisdom and collective experiences with colonial administration, especially from the Government of India Act 1935, gave us a workable and serving Constitution and such a structure of polity and governance which during the last six and half decades has succeeded in creating a 'survival society' and stable polity in India. Primarily being a document of 'national self-actualization', the founding fathers set-in the three important objectives of the Constitution – unity and integrity, democracy, and social revolution. They thoughtfully prescribed a model of 'federal union', and 'federal nation', which truly symbolizing the universally acclaimed Indian principle of "unity in diversity."<sup>xi</sup>

At the founding moment of the constitutional design of the post-colonial nation-state in India, it was a difficult challenge to reconcile and bring unity among the diverse groups and different communities. It was not possible without crafting a Constitutional design which could take care of the diverse identity needs of the groups along with reconciling them with citizenship. It is in this sense that the founders of our Constitution adopted federal form of government in order to implement the principle of diversity in unity. Therefore, the space of autonomy, both personal and institutional, is well articulated within the text of the Constitution. They perceived federalism essentially as a solution to a number of ethnic and linguistic problems, governance of Princely and British Provinces and increasing communal antagonism.<sup>xii</sup> Atul Kohli has rightly claimed that, "among the political processes that have been contributed to the strengthening of democracy in India is the establishment of successful federal system. This has

*been essential in creating a degree of political cohesion among diverse ethnic regions.*<sup>xiii</sup>

Today federalism as a mechanism of accommodating diversity and power sharing in different forms and manifestations has emerged as an important principle of Indian democracy. Thus, the developments in Indian democracy from last decades have highly validated the relevance of federal idea in accommodating diversity. However, at the same time the working of India's federal system reveals certain flaws and weaknesses both at the structural and the functional levels. On retrospect one realizes that certain flaws were inherent in the pattern of federal system India had adopted, namely the Union form, with its pronounced tilt towards centralization of authority. Certain other flaws and weaknesses became apparent, some in the very process of the unfolding of the federal system and its processes and some others when popular demands for greater rights for segments and autonomy of states and for redressal of their grievances acquired momentum in the form of regionalism.<sup>xiv</sup> Regionalism has remained perhaps the most potent force in Indian politics ever since independence, if not before. Regionalism is rooted in India's manifold diversity of languages, cultures, tribes, communities, religions and so on, and encouraged by the regional concentration of those identity markers, and fuelled by a sense of regional deprivation. The feeling of regionalism has produced the feeling of separatism among the people living in the backward regions of India. It has largely created tension and bad blood between centre and states and has also manifested in the demand for secession, demand for statehood and demand for greater state autonomy.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Regionalism: A Fast Growing Phenomenon in Indian Federalism**

Regionalism has remained perhaps the most striking feature and fast spreading phenomenon in Indian politics ever since independence, if not before. A region is defined as a territorial unit including particular language or languages, castes, ethnic groups or tribes, particular social setting and cultural pattern etc. This feeling arises either due to the continuous neglect of a particular area or because the people of a particular region become politically aware and seek to fight perceived discrimination. Regionalism means love for that particular region or state in preference to the country as a whole, and in certain cases, in preference to the state of which that particular region is a part. The term 'regionalism' has two connotations. In the negative sense, it implies excessive attachment to one's region is preference to the country or the state. In the positive sense it is a political attribute associated with people's love for their region, culture, language, etc. with a view to maintain their independent identity. While positive regionalism is a welcome thing in so far maintaining as it encourages the people to develop

a sense of brotherhood and commonness on the basis of common language, religion or historical background. The negative sense regionalism is a great threat to the unity and integrity of the country. In the Indian context generally the term regionalism has been used in both negative and positive sense.

Regionalism, generally speaking is regarded as a decisive trend detrimental to a national unity. In popular parlance, it is supposed to be synonym of provincialism which breeds localism, isolationism and separatism. It is a socio-economic and cultural movement against the imposing of monolithic national unity by imposing a particular political ideology, language or culture pattern to foster national integration. It is a political counter-movement aiming to achieve greater autonomy of sub-cultural regions through greater degree of self-government within the federal system of a nation. However, the two main traits of regionalism in the light of present paper are that, it has produced the feeling of separatism among the people living in the backward regions of India. It has also manifested in the demand for secession, demand for statehood and demand for greater state autonomy from the Centre government and secondly it has given rise the emergence and rise of regional political parties i.e., it has replaced Indian party system from Single party system to Multi-party system.<sup>xvi</sup>

### ***Emergence of Regionalism in India and its root causes***

Regionalism is not a new phenomenon in the Indian political system. In the pre-independence days it was promoted by the British imperialists and they deliberately encouraged the people of various regions to think in terms of their own region rather than the nation as a whole, with a view to maintain their hold over India during the national movement. After Independence the leaders tried to foster a feeling among the people that they belonged to one single nation. The framers of the constitution sought to achieve this by introducing single citizenship for all. With the same objective a unified judiciary, all Indian services, and a strong Central government was provided. But in view of the vastness of the country and cultures regionalism soon made its appearance in India. After the implementation of the new Constitution, discontentment and unhappiness had begun to surface between the Centre Government and State Governments. Administrative interruption of regional identities led to demands for separation and the formation of new States.<sup>xvii</sup>

The first manifestation of regionalism was the demand for reorganization of states on linguistic basis, but the most effective play of regionalism was the victory of the DMK against Congress in Tamil Nadu in 1960s. Initially the central leadership felt that regionalism was a peripheral political factor confined to Tamil Nadu and hence

did not pose any threat to national unity. However, that assessment was ill-founded. Soon in Punjab the Akali movement gained momentum, while in Jammu and Kashmir Sheikh Abdullah revived the National Conference. During these initial years all the Indian political parties continued to adjust with these regional forces on the plea that they would ultimately succeed in making inroads into the bases of the regional parties and absorb them in their organizations. The Indian National Congress also contributed to the growth of regionalism in India during its hegemonic period (1947-1967) by following a policy of blowing hot and cold toward the regional forces. The local Congress leaders also encouraged the growth of regionalism and strengthened their hold on local party organization, with a view to increase their bargaining power with the central leaders. The close link between the central and regional leadership greatly encouraged the growth of regionalism. There are some root causes for the growth of regionalism in India which are discussed below:

**(a) Historical and cultural factors:** In the Indian scenario, the historical and cultural factors assume greater significance. The historical and cultural components interpret regionalism by way of cultural heritage, folklore, myths, symbolism and historical traditions. People of a particular cultural group also derive inspirations from the noble deeds and glorious achievements of the local heroes. Nevertheless, there are sudden political and economic realities which can be covered under the gamut of historical and cultural factors. These are geographical proximity, a common language, similar usages and customs, comparable socio-economic and political stage of development, common historical tradition and experience, a common way of living, administrative expediency and more than anything else, a widely prevalent sentiment of 'togetherness' i.e. a sense of identity. The desire of the various units of the Indian federal system to maintain their sub cultural regions and greater degree of self-government has promoted regionalism and given rise to demand for greater autonomy. The desire of regional elites to capture power has also led to rise of regionalism. It is well known fact that political parties like DMK, AIADMK, Akali Dal, Telugu Desam Asom Gana Parishad etc., have encouraged regionalism to capture power.

**(b) Economic factors:** This is the main cause of regionalism in India. Uneven development in many parts of the country may be construed as the prime reason of regionalism and separatism. There are certain regions in the country where industries and factories have been concentrated and well developed, educational and health facilities are adequately provided, communication network has been developed, rapid agricultural development has been made possible. But there are also certain areas where the worth of independence is yet to be realized in terms of socio-economic development.

Indeed, the British administration may be held responsible for causing such wide regional variations due to their suitability for the purpose of administration, trade and commerce. But in the post-independence era, efforts should have been made for regional balance in matters of industrial, agricultural and above all, economic development. This disparity has caused the feeling of relative deprivation among the inhabitants of economically neglected regions. It has manifested itself in the demand for separate states such as Bodoland, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and so on. In Maharashtra alone there are feelings of resource transfers from Marathwada, Vidharva and Konkan to more prosperous regions in the State. 'Internal Colonization' or neglect and exploitation of a region by another dominant region in a State apparatus lead to large scale disenchantment in the sub-region.<sup>xviii</sup>

**(c) Politico-administrative factors:** Political parties, especially the regional political parties as well as local leaders, exploit the regional sentiments, regional deprivation and convert them to solidify their factional support bases. They give place to the regional problems in their election manifesto and promise for political and regional development. Regionalism made its appearance as a reaction against the efforts of the national government to impose a particular ideology, language or cultural pattern on all people and groups. Thus the States of South have resisted imposition of Hindi as official language because they feared this would lead to dominance of the North. Similarly, in Assam anti-foreigner movement was launched by the Assamese to preserve their own culture. Continuous neglect of an area or region by the ruling parties and concentration of administrative and political power has given rise to demand for decentralization of authority and bifurcate of unilingual states. On occasions sons of soil theory has been put forth to promote the interests of neglected groups or areas of the state.

**(d) Growing Awareness and Feelings of Regionalism:** The growing awareness among the people of backward areas that they are being discriminated against has also promoted feeling of regionalism. The local political leaders have fully exploited this factor and tried to feed the people with the idea that the Central Government was deliberately trying to maintain regional imbalances by neglecting social and economic development of certain areas.

**(e) Modernization and mass participation:** The interaction between the forces of modernization and mass participation has also largely contributed to the growth of regionalism in India. As the country is still away from realizing the goal of a nation state, the various groups have failed to identify their group interests with national interests; hence the feeling of regionalism has persisted.



**(f) Caste and religion:** When caste is combined with language conflicts or religious fundamentalism, it breeds regional feeling. It leads to dogmatism, orthodoxy and obscurantism.

**(g) Decline of National Sentiments:** During the last a few years there has been a decline of the nationalist feeling and at the same time regional feeling are growing stronger among the people. **(h) Frustrations of Political Leaders:** Sometimes the frustrations of the political leaders also gave the birth to narrow regionalism.

#### ***Impact of Regionalism on Indian federal Political System***

**(a) Demand for more State Autonomy:** Regionalism has often led to the demand by states for greater autonomy from the center. Increasing interference by the Centre in the affairs of the states has led to regional feelings. Demand for autonomy has also been raised by regions within some states of the Indian federation.

**(b) Demand for Full statehood and Secession from the Union:** Secession from a Union is a dangerous form of regionalism. It emerges when states demand separation from the Centre and try to establish an independent identity of their own, for example – demand for Khalistan, demand for Nagaland and demand for Jammu and Kashmir etc. Secondly, most States and even regions are demanding for full statehood. In India, Most of the Union Territories were not in favour of 14th amendment of the constitution. Therefore, the Union territories of Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Goa were granted the status of full statehood and the remaining union territories are demanding full statehood. Yet there are 31 more demands for Statehood. They are Bundelkhand, Poorvanchal, Bhojpur and Harit Pradesh or Jatland in the Uttar Pradesh: Vindhya Pradesh, Baghelkhand, Rewanchal, Madhya Bharat, Mahakosal, Malwa in Madhya Pradesh, Mithila in Bihar, Saurashtra in Gujarat, Konkan, Vidarbha and Marathwada in Maharashtra, Kosal Rajya in Orissa, Gorkhaland and Ramtapuri in West Bengal, Kashmir and Jammu and Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir, Bodoland, and Poorvanchal and Kuchh Bihar in Assam, Kukiland in Nagaland, Garoland in Meghalaya and Hamar State in Mizoram. However, most notable demands for creation of new States after Telangana are, Vidharva of Maharashtra, Western UP which is termed as “Harit Pradesh”, Western Orissa termed as “Kosal Pradesh” etc. there are movements in this regard with occasional rallies, agitation, petitions and representation in pursuance of the demand for separate statehood.<sup>xix</sup>

**(c) Emergence of Regional Political Parties:** We have witnessed the existence of regional parties because of neglecting and imbalance of national government in social, cultural and economic development of different areas. Regional parties

came into existence to take care of these problems so that their demands have been fulfilled. Regional parties, instead of posing danger to national unity, constitute the necessary concomitant factor of a federal system with emphasizing on integrating sub-regional identities into the political system and in this process these parties helped the country to strengthen the unity in diversity.<sup>xx</sup>

#### ***Regional Political Parties in Balancing Regionalism and Federalism in India***

The rise of regional political parties have played significant role in the regional, state and even national politics of our democratic country. Initially, India's view on regional political parties is deeply coloured by what Benjamin Disraeli, the famous British Prime Minister observed about it, namely Britain does not love coalition. To an average Indian, these parties, therefore, evokes an image of instability, indecisiveness and other attributes of such a negative colour.<sup>xxi</sup> However they have stabilized themselves with the passage of time and have brought significant changes in the working of the Indian federalism. It has led to the federalization of the regional political parties which have become central to the making or unmaking of the government at the union level. The present day coalition era of regional political parties has now seems to have become a practical and political necessity to avoid political instability and frequent elections. Assertion of various social segments and their manifestation in political formations are now existing realities which need further democratization, federalisation and Consociationalism in governance. It would be pertinent here to have a look at the impact of regional political parties on the drift through which the Indian federalism has been passed.

1. First of all, the rise of regional parties has contributed to the break-down of the one-party or dominant party system at the Centre and a total reversal of the authoritarian and centralized politics of Congress (I) leadership under whose tenure, the Congress (I) High Command was treating the Chief Ministers as though the Chief of Municipalities. The Congress (I) Prime Ministers never treated the Chief Ministers as equal partners in the running of federal polity of India. The Chief Ministers had to depend on the Prime Minister for survival in their office. In contrast to these past political cultures, the current Indian politics have been drastically federalized by the regional parties. The Prime Minister is no more as powerful as they used to be under One-party dominant system. The President and the Governors are no more rubber stamps endorsing the dictates of the ruling party rather they are conscious of their constitutional roles. The regional parties

came to play major roles at the national level and also the key players in coalition government. This kind of change in political parties in India reflects the drastic change in politics of federalism, shifting from dominant federalism to cooperative Federalism. Changes in the nature of party system from one party dominant system to multiparty system and coalition politics becoming a political reality in the contemporary political discourse have altered the contours of Indian federalism. Coalition governance is rated to be wide representative of diversity prevailing in a federal system<sup>xxii</sup>.

2. Historically, India's political parties have played a major role in both the symbolic and actual integration of citizens into the democratic process. Indeed, because they have overwhelmingly respected and nurtured democratic norms, both in elections and in governance, they have helped establish the broad, inclusive, participative Indian state. India's political parties have helped, in Linz, Stephan, and Yadav's terms, to build India as a "state-nation." A state nation is one created by state institutions and policies that respect and protect multiple and complementary identities, beyond just ethno-linguistic federalism.<sup>xxiii</sup>
3. The birth of a coalition-based state governments marked the rise of a new phase in the context of state politics as much smaller and regional parties compared with the nationalist parties were able not only to win the popular support of the masses at the time of election to state assemblies but also were able to combine themselves with each other despite their differences in political ideology and form the government at the level of various states. It's true that their common anti-Congress ideology came to the fore in such activity but there is more to it than simple the much touted anti congress ideology. The causes for the emergence of this phenomenon may be enumerated as follows: discriminatory role of the Governors in the dismissal of Chief Ministers, reservation of Bills for consideration of the President, demand for repealing certain laws, dismissal of State governments under Article 356, non-implementation of central laws,

deployment of CRP, use of All India Services by the Centre Government, alleged discrimination against States – Allocation of Central Projects, allocation of food grains, food for work programme, grants and loan meals, post ponement of Assembly by-elections on partisan grounds, use of mass media for partisan purposes, appointment of inquiry commissions against Chief Ministers, CBI inquiries, visits of Prime Minister/Ministers in the States.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### Conclusion

Federalism as an idea and a process enriches democracy in a multicultural country like India, as it tends to promote democratic values and temperament by recognizing, accommodating and protecting diverse regional identities and rights. The vastness of diversities and myriad forms of identities, therefore, have not only to be reconciled in the quest for a new federal identity of India but also they have to be preserved, promoted and tolerated, and this is the basic concern of the process of federal nation-building. However, it does not mean that all the elements and aspects of diversities and every kind of identities have to be preserved. There are still certain weaknesses and defects in Indian federal system that threatens the unity and integrity of the country. The central government must not interfere in the affairs of the State unless it is unavoidable for national interest. There should be needed to promote even development of the hitherto neglected areas so that they feel a part of the national mainstream. Problems of people must be solved in a peaceful and constitutional manner. Politicians must not be allowed to misuse the issue of regional demands. Except for issues of national importance, the states should be given freedom and more and more autonomy to run their own affairs. Changes are necessary in the Central-State relations in favour of the states, and for introducing a system of national education that would help people to overcome regional feelings and develop an attachment towards the nation. The creation of smaller states would contribute to the federal agenda of enhancing democratic development based on decentralized governance and greater autonomy for units. If, these are possible to plan, implement and effectuate, then we can be fulfilled by the unique proud of the greatest democracy with the greatest harmony having lot of varieties in natural and anthropogenic landscapes.

### Notes

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